



Counselling support for postgraduate open and distance e-learning students in South Africa: A case study

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Despite the support structures offered at Open distance e-learning (ODEL) higher education institutions, slow completion and attrition attest to postgraduate students' challenging study experiences. This qualitative and interpretivist case study examines postgraduate students' experiences of counselling support at an ODeL institution in South Africa with the research question: What are postgraduate student experiences of counselling services, and how may they inform optimal practice at an ODeL institution? A questionnaire and semi-structured telephone interviews were completed by a total purposive sample of fifteen masters, doctoral and PhD students from one department at the institution. Data was analysed thematically. Findings indicate that although many students were unaware of the institution's student support services, they would seek counselling. However, counselling decisions were impacted by counsellor-student gender, age, and cultural factors. Open distance e-learning counselling services require more awareness, accessibility, and robust online and digital media approaches. Future research could focus on more comprehensive postgraduate student experiences throughout the institution's departments.

Contribution: Open distance e-learning postgraduate students face challenges that lead to slow progress and high attrition. Counselling support is crucial to help students overcome these barriers and complete their studies. This study highlights mature students' obstacles when accessing counselling services to address their mental health and academic concerns. The research underscores the impact of age, gender, and culture on access to counselling services. Ultimately, the study emphasises the need for timely and improved counselling services to support postgraduate students in advancing their studies.

Keywords: counselling, ODeL, online student support, postgraduate, student mental health.

Introduction

Open distance e-learning (ODEL) has eliminated geographic barriers in higher education and facilitated global student access to lifetime learning. Regardless of accessibility, postgraduate students in an ODeL environment face unique challenges as mature, employed learners (Letseka & Pitsoe 2013). Obstacles include study-related matters and mental health concerns arising from employment, home and family conditions. Other matters ranging from institutional culture and language that are different to the students', and low motivation and inadequate preparation skills for postgraduate study create anxiety and stress (Heeralal 2015; Maunganidze et al. 2010; Wyatt & Oswalt 2013). In ODeL, students typically work in isolation, without peer support and exacerbating difficulties (Cao et al. 2020; Schulze 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown had multiple implications for postgraduate students. Fear and anxiety related to the virus, socioeconomic challenges, family concerns and institution closures created unprecedented stress (Cornwall et al. 2019). In addition to the mental health effects of COVID-19, students needed additional resources to fully navigate online learning (Botha 2021). Uncertainty and restricted communication with supervisors heightened student anxieties (Nash 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated postgraduate students' pre-existing mental health issues (Schulze 2011; Visser & Wyk 2021). Eloff (2021) describes similar pre-existing worries in undergraduate students.

Given the necessity for counselling services, this study sought to learn more about how postgraduate students at an ODeL institution experience counselling services. The related

research questions are: (1) *What are postgraduate students' experiences of counselling services?* (2) *How may they inform optimal practice at an ODeL institution?*

Psychological vulnerabilities

Students' mental health in higher education is an increasing concern (Maunganidze et al. 2010; Son et al. 2020). Various factors contribute to high-stress levels and place students at risk for psychological vulnerabilities (Okopi 2011; Visser & Wyk 2021; Stoddard 2017). In the United States, one in every three college students experienced severe depression and about one out of every 10 students with depression had suicidal ideation (Eisenberg et al. 2011). According to Shuchman (2009), only a few students with suicide ideation seek an institution's counselling centre support, perhaps because of stigma (Eisenberg et al. 2009; Martin 2010). In South Africa, Bantjies et al. (2016) found depression and anxiety predictors of suicide ideation among university students.

However, master's and doctoral students in an ODeL institution may be most severely affected by mental health concerns. Postgraduate studies in themselves are severely stressful, as is the ODeL environment impacting students' social and emotional lives (Pavlakakis & Kaitelidou 2012). Most postgraduate students study part-time while working full-time to further their careers by earning master's and doctorate degrees. Balancing employment, studies and financial issues is a continual cause of concern (Cornwall et al. 2019; Stoddard 2017).

Furthermore, doctoral students' stresses included aspects related to time uncertainty and a sense of needing to belong to scholarly communities to curb academic isolation (Cornwall et al. 2019; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman 2014). In addition, postgraduate students multitask with time management challenges and limited study and research skills (Heeralal 2015; Maunganidze et al. 2010). Limited academic and research skills without support from supervisors and peers compound the problems.

The COVID-19 implications and exacerbations

During the pandemic, researchers reported high levels of anxiety and depression among higher education students (Son et al. 2020). In South Africa, students reported difficulties in coping and psychological challenges (Visser & Wyk 2021:229), with 45.6% reporting anxiety and 35% depression. Research also showed that social, academic, spiritual and physical well-being and positive coping strategies influenced students' emotional difficulties and mental health (Visser & Wyk 2021). For example, Eloff (2021) found that undergraduate students turned to spirituality to enhance their well-being during the pandemic. Their central support systems were family, peers and lecturers, facilitating online connectedness (Eloff 2021). Postgraduate students who lack access to non-academic support services (e.g. counselling) include the family doctor or help online sources for support (Waight & Giordano 2018).

Postgraduate student attrition

Students' option to discontinue their studies seems to be the only solution when they experience stressful situations. Hence, universities worldwide face the challenge of high postgraduate dropout rates (Schulze 2017; Wollast et al. 2018). The main reasons for student attrition are attributed to: (1) limited time for studies because of work and family obligations, (2) perceived difficulty of the programme, (3) a lack of academic and systemic support (e.g. supervisor-supervisee relationship breakdown), (4) a lack of motivation and interest, and instances where (5) the study theme is not relevant to the student's current occupation (Biswas & Mythili 2006; Dreyer 2010; Schulze 2011; Visser & Wyk 2021). Students who drop out usually feel low self-esteem, failure and incompetence (Schulze 2011).

Academic and non-academic support

Higher education institutions have a duty of care to promote a supportive research environment (Cornwall et al. 2019). Hence, according to the ODeL framework, students can extend their studies in a flexible way to meet their need for time and space. On average, the time it takes from start to finish for a master's degree is 3 to 4 years, while doctoral or PhD studies can take 6 years or more to complete. However, many students find this academic journey long, overwhelming and stress-inducing. Considering the extended study duration, a breakdown in the supervisor-student connection is likely (Schulze 2011; Zegeye et al. 2018). This fallout is of concern because lecturers and advisors are part of student support systems (Eloff 2021; Eloff, O'Neil & Kanengoni 2021) and the success of ODeL depends on functional and optimal student support systems (Ngubane-Mokiwa 2017).

Counselling

Given the psychological, emotional and educational challenges postgraduates face (Maunganidze et al. 2010), the counselling pillar of support should be mandatory at all institutions. The counselling process is aimed at assisting people in overcoming obstacles while keeping the future in mind. Counselling, by definition, helps people improve well-being by minimising or eliminating negative thought patterns and encouraging a positive state of mind conducive to overall well-being and, as a result, academic achievement and personal advancement.

When students encounter problems, whether they are related to their mental health, academic ability or career growth, they require professional counselling. The current support framework of identifying weaknesses, remediating and advising students on learning skills needs to be revised as learning barriers must be addressed in collaboration (Simpson 2008). Accordingly, as students' social-emotional contexts influence their mental health and academic achievements, a holistic and systemic approach to student mental health support is required.

Internationally, higher institutions have established student support structures comprising social workers, counsellors,

student-led mental health groups and clinical psychologists on campus (Eisenberg et al. 2011). However, such resources may not be adequate for students unaware or unwilling to access mental health resources (Eisenberg et al. 2011; Shuchman 2009; Yorgason, Linville & Zitzman 2008). In South Africa, few support structures with limited personnel are available at most higher education institutions (Eloff et al. 2021).

Given the significance of student counselling and psychological support, the institution's website offers its services to students via the Directorate for Counselling and Career Development (DCCD) in this study. According to the DCCD Service Charter the DCCD is:

[D]edicated to providing students with counselling, guidance and academic support services that add value to their career choices and learning and that are relevant within an open and distance learning context. (University of South Africa n.d.)

The DCCD (n.d.) states its objectives:

- To provide every registered student with practical, empathic, caring and confidential counselling interventions through staff professional development and infusion of information technology-enabled solutions and management.
- To facilitate purposeful learning of students through community outreach and community engagement collaborations; institute referral protocols for students needing personal counselling; develop graduate attributes in students and prepare students for their roles in society and the world of work.

The DCCD offers career guidance counselling, learning skills and academic support. In addition, psychological counselling is provided for trauma and grief; emotional and personal disturbance; depression and anxiety; intra- and inter-personal relations; and self-confidence issues. The DCCD's proactive services include the development of digital self-help resources. Students are actively encouraged to contact DCCD by email, telephone and in-person to discuss challenges and negotiate support (University of South Africa n.d.).

While information about the mental health challenges experienced by students at contact institutions is documented (e.g. Eloff 2021; Son et al. 2020; Wollast et al. 2018), the extent of these challenges with ODeL postgraduate students still needs to be clarified. There appears to be a gap in the literature about postgraduate students' knowledge of and access to counselling services at the ODeL institution. Hence, this study aimed to explore how selected master's and doctoral or PhD students in one department experience counselling support at an ODeL institution in South Africa. In the Theoretical underpinning section, we discuss the theories that support this study.

Theoretical underpinning

We draw from Anderson's socio-behavioural model (SBM) to explore students' complexities while seeking institutional counselling support. We propose a Positive Psychology lens

to emphasise the need to harness and mobilise students' strengths, resources and assets within multisystemic levels to promote motivation and reduce attrition rates (Simpson 2008).

Academic support can only succeed in collaboration. For example, when support focuses solely on identifying learning barriers, recognising learning deficits and strengthening learning abilities, students' psychosocial and emotional needs are neglected. A psychological component is an essential ingredient for holistic support. For instance, integrating motivation (positive psychology perspective) increases students' achievement (Simpson 2008). Combining learning with psychosocial and emotional awareness and motivation serves as systemic support components.

Andersen's SBM (Andersen 1995 in Goh, Furlonger & Jacobs 2018) guides understanding of how and why students may seek counselling support for mental health. The SBM identifies three external contributing factors (Goh et al. 2018). The first factor is predisposing, and student characteristics such as attitudes, beliefs, age, gender and culture impact an individual's proclivity to seek help (Heider et al. 2014). For example, a positive attitude towards and a belief in therapeutic benefits could guide a student to seek counselling when required. Students' age and gender variables must be examined as female students experience more mental health challenges than male students (Auerbach et al. 2018; Bantjies et al. 2016). More females are more likely than males to seek counselling assistance (Sheik & Furnham 2000). Younger students are more likely to seek professional help than older students (Sheik & Furnham 2000).

The second component is enabling (systems). Ecosystemically, individuals do not operate in isolation but within diverse interacting social systems, which may have a detrimental or beneficial impact on the individual's education. Universities may become ideal environments for students' learning, psychological growth and overall well-being.

In positive psychology, the ecosystemic viewpoint offers a conceptual framework for analysing interactions inside and between multiple levels of the social setting in which the student may be operating. The ecosystemic theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) connects individual development to the societal surroundings and internal processes. A family may be an enabling factor when the person's family or significant other accepts and encourages the individual to seek treatment, support and therapy. When a person is aware of counselling benefits and when services are easily accessible, the student community may become an enabling element (Goh et al. 2018). Barriers to learning and counselling (needs) should be addressed throughout all interrelated systems, not just with the individual student.

The third factor to consider while evaluating the accessibility of support services is the need thereof (Goh et al. 2018). The student must recognise when obstacles and challenges exceed their ability to cope and require professional support, such as counselling or other professional services. Previous counselling experience may have a beneficial or harmful

impact on persons seeking help. When there is congruence between students' predisposing, enabling and need criteria, they are more likely to seek professional and supportive mental health services (Goh et al. 2018).

Method

Research design

We followed an instrumental case study design as it was deemed appropriate for this research project that sought to understand and explore the experiences and perspectives of a specific group of individuals within a particular context to generate practical knowledge that can inform and guide practice or policy (Creswell 2014). In this study, the bounded case was the selected cohort of master's and doctoral or PhD candidates in one specific department at a single university.

Participants and setting

All master's and doctoral or PhD students in the Department of Psychology of Education were invited to participate. The selection criterion was that the student needed to have been registered in the postgraduate programme for at least 1 year and completed the proposal writing module (MPEDU91 or DPEDU01). They would be assumed to have experience studying in an ODeL context and be familiar with the institutions' support services. Through purposive sampling procedures, nine master's and six doctorate or PhD students were selected, ensuring a manageable and feasible data collection process. It was an adequate sample size for a qualitative research study (Creswell 2014). Nine master's and six doctorate or PhD students were selected.

Data collection

In phase 1, participants responded to a biographical questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions concerning their gender, age, degree, province or country of residence and the years they spent on their degree thus far. We emailed the questionnaire to the 15 selected students (nine master's and six doctoral or PhD). Completed questionnaires were returned in password-protected documents.

In phase 2, we posed open-ended and semi-structured questions telephonically to participants. The aim was to gain insight into the students' experiences of the institution's counselling services to generate new knowledge to enhance counselling as a tool for postgraduate student support in an ODeL context. In developing the questionnaire for our qualitative study, we drew on existing literature and our personal experiences of postgraduate supervision and as psychologists to identify key themes and topics to explore. The critical trustworthiness criteria in this qualitative study were credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Creswell 2014). To meet the dependability criterion, the researchers provided detailed descriptions, which could allow the replication of the study. To attain confirmability, the researchers proved that conclusions came from data rather than their own biases (Shenton 2004).

Ethical considerations

The study was part of a broader research project that examined the institution's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The institution's College of Education, Research Ethics Committee approved the study (reference no.: 2018/03/1490060059/MC). All participants gave their written informed consent after being informed of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality and anonymity of the data and that they were free to withdraw at any stage without recourse.

Participants were allowed 2 weeks to complete and return the questionnaire. Thereafter, semi-structured telephonic interviews were conducted over 4 months. Risks of online communication were discussed with participants. All data were anonymised with a coding process.

Data analysis

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006:87, 2019) six stages of thematic analysis and incorporated reflexive thematic analysis practices to analyse the data:

- Phase 1: Familiarisation with data
- Phase 2: Coding data
- Phase 3: Identifying patterns
- Phase 4: Review themes
- Phase 5: Define and name the identified themes
- Phase 6: Produce and report the findings

This process involved organising the data, reading and creating memos, describing, classifying and interpreting data into codes and themes, interpreting the data, and representing and visualising the data.

The researchers read and re-read the selected textual data in the first phase. In the second phase, the researchers coded the selected data. In the third phase, patterns and shared ideas in the participants' descriptions of their thoughts and experiences were detected to identify recurrent themes across the selected data. Following identifying initial themes, the subsequent step (four) included evaluating these themes. This stage ensured themes found in the third phase corresponded to the codes defined in phase two, allowing for the development of an overall theme table.

Phase 5 was completed when the themes were determined, including defining and labelling each theme found during phase 4 – the procedure ended by creating and analysing a report on the results.

Results

Participants were masters, doctoral and PhD postgraduate students. In phase 1, participants self-disclosed their biographical information in a questionnaire. Participants (male and female) were between the age range of 30 and 50 years. Thirteen participants were South African and two were Zimbabwean.

Through thematic content analysis of the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the interviews, we identified the following themes:

- Awareness of and experiences with the institution's student support services
- COVID-19 implications for students' mental health
- Counselling support could mitigate challenges
- Students' perspectives on how to improve counselling services in an ODeL setting.

We discuss these themes next, and we provide verbatim evidence.

Theme 1: Students' awareness of and experiences with the institution's student support services

Most participants indicated they needed to be made aware of any or all of the counselling services the institution offered its students. Some students were aware only of academic and career counselling but did not know they could request counselling for emotional and psychological problems affecting their studies:

'I do not know about counselling. I read the study guides, but it does not say. If I knew, I would ask for help deciding on my subjects and how to study.' (Participant 1, masters student, male)

Participant 7 confirmed this lack of awareness:

'I am not aware but surmise that [institution name] will offer subject counseling.' (Participant 7, PHD student, female)

Participant 12 acknowledged she was unaware of any counselling services available at the institution. She surmised if other universities offered counselling services, this institution should also have to, but she needed clarification about what and how to access counselling services. She was also still determining whether she would utilise the services.

Although students' study in an ODeL environment, some students live within close proximity of regional centres and can access the facilities there. According to Participant 1:

'I do not know, if I did, maybe I will go to the office in Florida. I live nearby.' (Participant 1, masters student, male)

He implied he had not known about the counselling services, but if he had known, he would have gone to the Florida campus to access counselling support for the problems he was experiencing. Participant 14 indicated that she did not use any of the institution's counselling services because of accessibility, costs and other personal reasons. She was also not aware of support via telephone, email or online (MS Teams).

Overall, students reflected that although they needed counselling, they did not consult the institution's counselling services. Students preferred to consult with professionals outside the university. For example, Participant 11 stated:

'I have not had a need for making use of them [counselling services at the institution].' (Participant 11, PHD student, female)

Participant 6 mentioned she did not use counselling services offered by the institution and consulted with a private, professional counsellor.

Participants were reluctant to trust the counsellors and questioned their age and prior experience in counselling (maturity). In this instance, Participant 4, who was in the age range of 50+, said:

'I have my own network; I do not trust counsellors at [institution's name] because I have never come across a mature, experienced person except for the teaching staff. I would first ask if you [counsellor at the institution] have [had] any experience. I would really feel I am wasting my time, because you [the counsellor] might not have an idea of what I am going through.' (Participant 4, doctorate student, female)

Participant 15 added she was mindful her age played a role in her distrust of the counsellors at the institution. This view of distrust was reiterated by Participant 7, who reflected that she did not think counselling had helped her in the past and would, therefore, not attend counselling now. She stated:

'No, no way, not again. I went for counselling in my first year, in undergraduate, but it wasted my time. The lady asked me questions I did not want to answer. It was all questions but no answers. So no, I do not trust them – they cannot help me.' (Participant 7, PHD student, female)

These responses allude that mature postgraduate students only sometimes have the confidence to seek support and might not trust younger, less experienced counsellors. This view was illustrated by Participant 5, who preferred to go to his pastor at church.

Theme 2: The COVID-19 implications for students' mental health

Before COVID-19, students experienced many challenges related to access to counselling support. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated mitigation measures precipitated psychosocial and financial challenges, with stresses aggravated by two main factors: (1) fear of 'catching' the virus and (2) psychosocial and financial challenges the pandemic lockdown precipitated. For example, participants reported being 'overwhelmed' and 'scared'.

Fear of 'catching' the virus

The high infection and mortality rates were reported daily in the media during the pandemic. Students witnessed severe illness and death because of COVID-19 in their families and communities. Accordingly, COVID-19 instilled much fear and anxiety among participants. Participant 2 explained her fear:

'I am too scared to "catch" the virus. My best friend's mother died last week. Therefore, I don't go out anywhere. I have a very old father who is sickly and I cannot spread the infection to him. I am very worried about him dying.' (Participant 2, masters student, female)

Psychosocial and financial challenges

Compounding their fear of contracting the virus, students also experienced psychosocial and financial difficulties

during the pandemic. According to Participant 3, she experienced loss and grief when her mother died. She felt she could not cope and sought external counselling at a high cost:

'My mother was very sick and died with COVID [COVID-19], and I couldn't cope this year. My friend told me to have counselling. I didn't know [institution name] has it too. I had to pay a lot of money, so I only went once. If I went to [institution name] counsellors for free, maybe I will continue ... I lost my job as a waitress when the lockdown started, and my mother helped me with her old age pension' (Participant 3, masters student, female)

The COVID-19-related psychosocial problems implied that students struggled to continue researching and writing dissertations. For instance, Participant 5 explained:

'I lost my wife – she had COVID-19. Now I can't study, and I can't finish chapters on time. Now I think maybe counselling will help me because I am struggling to look after my children.' (Participant 5, PHD student, male)

For many students, the illness and/or death of a family member because of COVID-19 can cause significant emotional distress, including feelings of grief, sadness and anxiety. This emotional distress can impact their mental health and well-being, making it difficult to concentrate on their studies, meet academic deadlines and complete coursework. In addition to the emotional impact, COVID-19 family death and illness can also have financial implications for master's and doctoral or PhD students. Students may need to take time off from their studies to care for a sick family member, which can impact their financial stability and ability to pay for tuition and living expenses. In addition, the death of a family member may impact the financial support that a student receives from their family, making it difficult to cover the cost of their education.

Furthermore, during the accompanying pandemic lockdowns, families experienced conflict because of gender role duties that conflicted with their studies. It is obvious from the aforementioned that counselling services are critical for students.

Theme 3: Counselling support could mitigate students' challenges

Studying in an ODeL context poses many challenges to students. Students could have received support in psychotherapy for emotional and psychological disorders. When they felt disparaged and despondent, participants believed counselling would have helped them. Participant 8 reflected:

'I had no knowledge about that [institution's name] had counselling. I would have gone for help. I finished the degree, but it was very hard. I wanted to stop many times. When the editor told me negative comments, I was hurt and stopped my work for a few weeks. My supervisor was the only one who helped me, though – she and my wife [sic].' (Participant 8, PHD student, female)

Generally, students indicated that they required help planning their studies and time management as it was challenging to juggle work and study.

Participant 2 states:

'My problems are with time – no time to sit and study so I don't know how counselling will help me.' (Participant 2, masters student, female)

The university community, family and the broader community – with its systemic influence – can support the students in achieving academic success by helping them stay motivated. Some students indicated that systemic support (partner, family, colleague and the university community, particularly their supervisors) and being well-informed (having knowledge) might motivate them to achieve academic success. For example, Participant 13 stated this view:

'Knowledge is power. So, if you are not informed, you can make uninformed decisions, for example, stop studying.' (Participant 13, masters student, male)

Students acknowledged the potential value inherent in seeking counselling, which is a resource. Knowledge about counselling services could help students who are facing multiple adversities. This view is evident in this response from Participant 3:

'My mother is very sick, and I could not cope this year. My friend [sic] told me to have counselling. I did not know [institution's name] has it too. I had to pay a lot of money, so I only went [sic] once. If I went to [institution's name] counsellors free, maybe I will continue [studying].' (Participant 3, masters student, female)

Participant 11 emphasised the need for systemic support:

'Studying at [institution's name] can be very lonely because of limited interaction with lecturers and other students. Sometimes I reach a brick wall with ideas. It is times like this when motivation will assist, especially for those [students] who are not surrounded by others.' (Participant 11, PHD student, female)

The same Participant 11 implied that the benefit of systemic support from a distance might 'benefit those around us by having happier and less stressed students in their lives'. In an earlier study, Biswas and Mythili (2006) confirmed that the high student attrition rate might likely be because of stresses linked to family and work-related problems. According to the study's findings, participants experienced many challenges, directly and indirectly, connected to their studies. Overall, they identified common challenges that could be mitigated by access to timely and efficient counselling services:

- support for learning-related barriers
- career counselling
- study skills and motivation
- personal and mental health challenges
- trauma counselling.

Theme 4: Students' perspectives on how to improve counselling services in an open distance e-learning setting

Students were asked how the ODeL institution could improve counselling services accessibility. The following are specific

suggestions made by students in the light of the lack of or limited awareness and the type of challenges they experienced requiring counselling support:

- Participant 8 stated that because the supervisor is the one who knows the student best, the supervisor should be more involved in the counselling process.
- Participant 11 said that more counsellors should be based at the [institution's name] regional offices.
- Participant 5 suggested online counselling, video chat counselling and instant messages.
- Participant 10 suggested team counselling and endorsed the idea of instant messages and WhatsApp video calls.
- Participant 6 said that more documents should be posted online on appropriate counselling and support topics, for example, 'how to', 'when' structured in a tab on the [institution website name] account. Furthermore, a 'note to the counsellor' button and a 'reply to question' button will help.
- Participant 15 suggested a 24 hours, 7 days a week (24/7) helpline for students and a more user friendly institution website where an electronic link would ask questions and guide students to the correct information – an electronic 'bot' guide.

Discussion

This study examined postgraduate students' experiences with counselling support at an ODeL institution in South Africa. The research question was: 'What are postgraduate students' experiences of counselling services at an ODeL institution, and how can it inform best practice?'

Awareness of and experiences with institutional support

Higher education systems function as enablers for graduate students when learning and research abilities are enhanced, and support for mental health is achieved to ensure students' general well-being throughout their studies (DiPlacito-DeRango 2016). However, students need to be aware of assistance options and seek them out, or the institution's environmental system will disable the student.

Furthermore, students must recognise inherent learning and psychological barriers to be aware that they require support and may not know where to find it. However, as in this study, some students were aware of the institutions' enabling resources but opted not to use them. This disjunction is a global issue (Eisenberg et al. 2011; Yorgason et al. 2008). According to Goh et al. (2018), being aware that such services exist is an external factor that encourages a person to seek help. Students in this study stated they were uninformed of the nature of the institutions' counselling support programmes and that if they had known, they would have sought counselling assistance. However, some students were reluctant, and their perspectives may be shaped by prior negative experiences, hearing about peers' negative experiences, an assumption that therapy does not work, the perceived stigma associated with mental health difficulties and apprehension about disclosing personal information to a counsellor (Son et al. 2020; Eisenberg et al. 2009).

However, if the potential advantages of counselling are explained, attitudes may shift (e.g. DiPlacito-DeRango 2016; McKenzie et al. 2015). While students may gain personally from counselling services, the systems they operate will also benefit (e.g. families and relationships). The need to seek counselling services is an internal process motivated by a desire to know and act in the world and a component of the many interconnected systems that affect the individual. Eloff (2021) identifies this process as 'personal agency', which, in the face of hardship, relies on personal relationships and spiritual coping mechanisms comparable to adaptive coping mechanisms (Son et al. 2020).

Attitudes, values, beliefs and personal qualities, such as age and gender, are predisposing variables that influence whether a student seeks counselling (Goh et al. 2018). According to Auerbach et al. (2018) and Bantjies et al. (2016), more female than male students encounter mental health difficulties and seek professional help (Sheik & Furnham 2000). Nonetheless, in the present research, male students were more likely than female students to express a desire to seek counselling assistance. Furthermore, this study supported Sheik and Furnham's (2000) finding that younger students are more inclined to request assistance.

The COVID-19 implications for students' mental health

Participants described their stresses and anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic's consequences for themselves, their families and their influence on their education. They explained that they felt overwhelmed by fear of catching the virus and by the psychological and financial challenges of the pandemic lockdown. Likewise, other studies found that students experienced loneliness, despair and anxiety during the pandemic (Son et al. 2020).

The pandemic has also had significant impacts on the social lives of postgraduate students, with many experiencing social isolation and loneliness because of lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings (Huckins et al. 2020). One study conducted in the United States of America found that graduate students reported higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic compared with pre-pandemic levels (Fitzpatrick, Harris & Drawve 2020). Another study conducted in Australia found that postgraduate students reported higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of well-being during the pandemic (Dodd et al. 2021).

In terms of financial implications, the pandemic has significantly impacted the incomes of many master's and doctoral students. A survey conducted in Australia found that 41% of graduate students reported a loss of income because of the pandemic, and many students have also reported difficulty in finding and securing funding for their research and studies (Cao et al. 2020; Dodd et al. 2021).

Despite their mental health difficulties, our study found that students encountered barriers to receiving professional

mental healthcare throughout the pandemic, one of which was the stigma. Stigma is a barrier that hinders people from obtaining mental health treatment (DiPlacito-DeRango 2016; Eisenberg et al. 2009).

Counselling support to mitigate students' challenges

As highlighted in the COVID-19 implications for students' mental health section, postgraduate students face various challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including stress and anxiety about their education, families and personal well-being. Previous research has also confirmed that students experience feelings of loneliness, despair and anxiety during times of crisis (Son et al. 2020).

Our research also revealed that female postgraduate students were more likely than male students to attribute their stress to a lack of study time, and many believed that counselling could help them better balance their academic obligations with family responsibilities. This finding is consistent with earlier studies showing that female students bear disproportionate household responsibilities (Stone & O'Shea 2013).

Given these challenges, it is essential for universities to provide counselling services tailored to the unique needs of postgraduate students. By offering mental health support that is accessible, confidential and culturally sensitive, universities can help mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic and promote the well-being of their students (Eloff 2021; Wollast et al. 2018).

Students' views on improving counselling services in open distance e-learning

Although overcoming challenges associated with mental health is acknowledged in research (see Nash 2021), practical strategies for alleviating this social burden remain a gap (Fischer et al. 2016; Nash 2021). In our study, students offered practical suggestions on strengthening ODeL counselling, especially for supervisor–student collaboration and emotional support. A supervisor provides emotional support and fosters positive mutual relationships (Nash 2021; Schulze 2011). However, this relationship enhancement task requires supervisor training (Schulze 2011).

Students advocated for greater access to online counselling, instant messages and WhatsApp video calls. For example, they suggested a 24-h student helpline and an interactive website. Online psychological services were widely supported in an early study (Maunganidze et al., 2010) and recent literature (see Li & Leung 2020; Liu et al. 2020; Torous et al. 2020).

Recommendations

Based on the findings, we propose initiatives to elevate student support services. Implementation could mean more postgraduate students will be aware of, have access to and use the institution's comprehensive counselling services. We

recommend clear signposting, online self-help, workshops, parity of support and supervisor training (Waight & Giordano 2018):

- Ongoing awareness and discourse around postgraduate student mental health issues.
- Targeted awareness campaign for newly registered students.
- Student self-awareness programmes to heighten agency (motivation) and mobilise personal assets and resources for well-being development. This aspect aligns with positive psychology tenets and a strength-based approach to student support.
- Drop-in centres (virtual and face-to-face).
- Adaptation to online technology: Asynchronous and technology-based synchronous media were the leading alternatives for online counselling services during the COVID-19 epidemic. Asynchronous social media with WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and synchronous media such as Teams, Zoom and Google Meeting, creates awareness to mitigate associated stigma. The institution could enhance the utility of technology-based intervention and train supervisors, counsellors and student support personnel.
- An ecosystemic approach with support initiatives at each level (e.g. institution, department, supervisor and student) to mitigate student mental health challenges.

Limitations

We acknowledge the following limitations of this study:

- The small sample size was selected exclusively from one department. Findings may only be generalised to some postgraduate students in this department or institution. However, given the similarities of postgraduate student challenges, we expect reasonable generalisability of these findings.
- Only a few participants provided reasons for not accessing counselling support services. This factor could limit findings.
- Data were collected before and during the initial stage of the pandemic when little was known about COVID-19, possibly affecting student responses.
- Follow-up questions could have increased data yielded and subsequent conclusions.
- Lastly, the study focused solely on postgraduate masters, doctoral and PhD students' perspectives. Undergraduate students may have different views and expectations of counselling support.

Conclusion

Postgraduate students experience multiple systemic challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting their studies. Without intervention, attrition is high, while throughput is low. It is concerning that many students are not aware of the available counselling support services to assist them in overcoming their difficulties. Regardless, characteristics such as the counsellor's age and experience level are potential obstacles that limit students' access to

resources. Accordingly, a range of ODeL-compatible counselling resources must be promoted extensively and made more visible and accessible to all students. Student-counsellor demographics must be considered. Although the study was conducted in South Africa, the findings and recommendations have global relevance. Further longitudinal research into the influence of online counselling on postgraduate student mental health is needed.

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K.M. and H.O. contributed equally to this research work.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, K.M., upon reasonable request.

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